

9-1-2002

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Recommended Citation

Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), "Vocational education and training : participation, achievement and pathways." (2002). *LSAY Briefing Reports*. (LSAY Briefing; n.7) http://research.acer.edu.au/lsay_briefs/3

Vocational education and training: participation, achievement and pathways

Introduction

LSAY Briefing is a series produced by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). The aim is to bring summaries of findings from ACER research to a wide audience – in an accessible format and language, and identifying some of the implications for policy and further research.

In particular, LSAY Briefings draw on data from ACER's Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) project. This Briefing Paper summarises research based on the LSAY national sample of students who were in Year 9 in 1995; the research studies their experiences as they move from school into post-secondary education, training and work.

This paper looks at some of the findings on participation in VET in Schools programs, pathways that are associated with these programs, and ways in which students who do not complete Year 12 can be helped by VET courses beyond the school. Key LSAY reports published by ACER on which this paper are based, and related references, are listed at the end of this briefing paper.

It should be noted that VET programs, particularly those in schools, are changing rapidly, and are growing in all jurisdictions. As a result, it is likely that the LSAY research findings underestimate the proportions of students and young people who currently participate.

Vocational Education and Training – in and out of school

An important development in Australian education in recent years has been the introduction and growth of programs in vocational education and training (VET). Traditionally, senior secondary certificate courses were oriented towards those pursuing university study. A change in emphasis came about when the apparent retention rate to Year 12 rose dramatically over the 1980s and 1990s, peaking at 77% nationally in 1992. As a result schools needed to accommodate a more diverse range of students. Vocational programs which comply with the National Training Framework were introduced and VET in Schools programs now form part of senior secondary certificates offered around Australia.



Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth BRIEFING

HIGHLIGHTS

- VET in Schools programs provide increased choice and opportunities to meet diverse student needs and interests.
- Nearly a quarter of those students who completed Year 12 have undertaken VET in Schools subjects.
- VET in Schools programs attract participation by students with lower academic results, but have value for all students in preparing them for the transition from school to the workplace or further education and training.
- There is an important and growing role for VET programs beyond the school, in providing pathways for young people who do not complete Year 12.
- Young people who are in areas of high unemployment and those who are the least job ready in terms of educational attainment are least likely to participate in VET.

The provision of VET subjects in schools was seen as a way of giving increased choice for students who were staying on to Year 12 but were not inclined towards academic studies, as well as to students who were at risk of leaving school early.

There is also an important role for VET in meeting the needs of students who leave school as non-completers. The term ‘non-completer’ refers to all those who leave school without completing Year 12, not only those who leave prior to the post-compulsory years (this group can be termed ‘early school leavers’). This includes those who do not continue at school beyond Year 10 and Year 11, as well as those who leave during Year 12 without obtaining a Year 12 certificate.

Students’ reasons for leaving school are diverse. For this heterogeneous group, VET provides an important pathway to further education and training – for example, supporting those who are undertaking apprenticeships, or providing programs for those who seek further education or training but not in a school environment.

VET in schools

The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the 21st Century (MCEETYA, 1999) stated explicitly that all students should have ‘participated in programs of vocational learning during the compulsory years and have had access to vocational education and training programs as part of their senior secondary studies’; and ‘access to the high quality education necessary to enable the completion of school education to Year 12 or its vocational

equivalent and that provides clear and recognised pathways to employment and further education and training’. National data indicate that the proportion of all secondary schools providing VET in Schools programs has increased from 70 per cent in 1997 to 87 per cent in 1999 (Malley et al, 2001). Resulting enrolments in VET in Schools have risen steadily between 1996 and 1999 (see Figure 1, below).

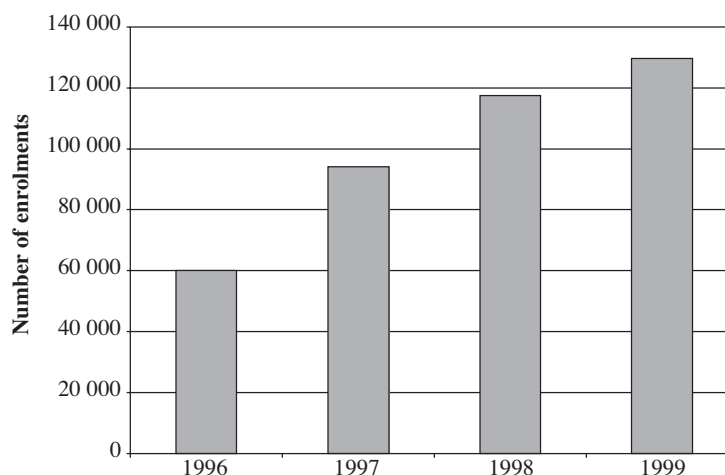
There are a number of good reasons for promoting VET programs in schools. These include:

- to foster closer links between school and work, which have been shown to result in high levels of student satisfaction (Warner, 1992; Batten and Russell, 1995);
 - to prepare participants for lifelong learning, through ‘learning to learn’ (Kirby, 2000); and
 - to provide enhanced opportunities in terms of type and attractiveness of future employment.
- fifteen per cent of students had undertaken some VET in Schools subjects at either Year 11 or Year 12;
 - seven per cent had completed subjects in both Year 11 and Year 12;
 - around one per cent had participated in a school-based new apprenticeship or traineeship.

Currently, there is great variety in the nature of VET programs provided around Australia. The amount of time that students spend on VET programs also varies; in 1998 it was estimated that an average student spent around three hours a week, which suggests a need for caution at this stage in attributing too much to the effect of VET participation on post-school activities – although this can be expected to change with time.

Fullarton (2001) examined the participation and immediate post-school destinations of a cohort of students who completed Year 12 in 1998. She found that nearly one quarter of the students surveyed had studied some VET subjects in Years 11 and 12. Nationally:

Figure 1: Enrolments in VET in Schools, 1996–1999



Sources: Ainley & Fleming, 1997; Spring 1999

The proportions of participating students varied between jurisdictions. In Queensland, for example, 41 per cent of senior school students participated in some VET subjects – the highest proportion for any state – while the lowest proportion was in Victoria, where the figure was only 12 per cent. This may relate partially to the differences between state systems of secondary education. The figures may also be affected by Victoria’s high proportion of independent schools, where participation in VET programs is less evident.

Characteristics of participants in VET in schools

Overall, students from particular groups were more likely than others to participate in VET in Schools programs. These included students:

- who had low academic results – with 37 per cent of students in the lowest achievement quartile

participating in VET, compared to 14 per cent of students in the highest achievement quartile;

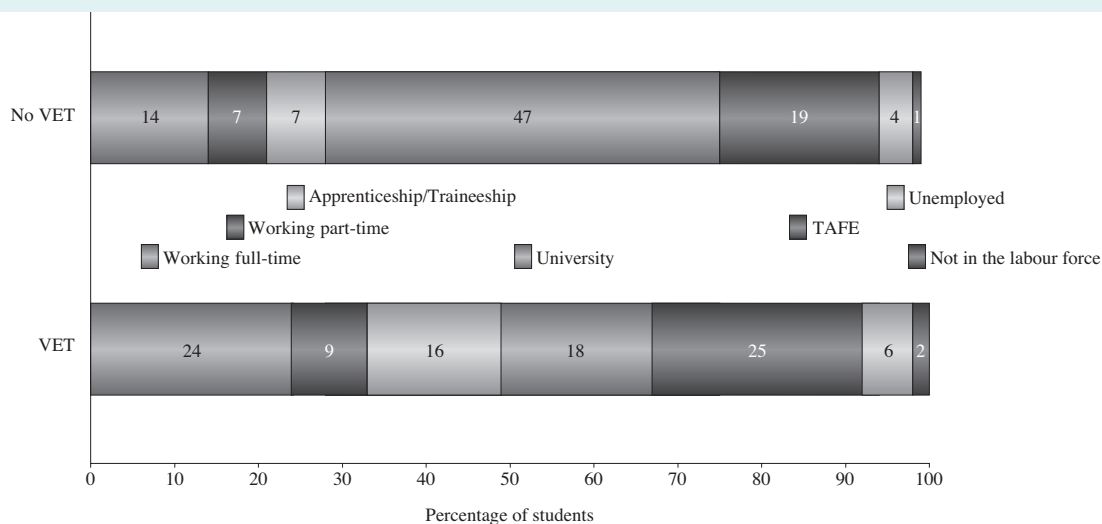
- from English-speaking backgrounds – 24 per cent participating in VET, compared to 18 per cent of students whose family background is from a non-English speaking country;
- living in rural areas – 26 per cent, as compared to 21 per cent in urban areas;
- without tertiary-educated parents – 27 per cent participating compared to 14 per cent of students with tertiary-educated parents; and
- attending government schools.

The traditional secondary school curriculum, and the emphasis in the senior years of schooling on academic learning, does not work for all students. Fullarton (2001) found that those students who showed some uncertainty about whether they wanted to remain at school were more inclined to participate in VET in Schools than those who were definite about remaining to

complete Year 12. It may be that the students are keeping their options open for further study or employment by combining academic and vocational subjects while at school. Fullarton (2001) also found that those students who expressed dissatisfaction with their schooling experience in Year 9 were those most likely to participate in VET in Schools in later years, and hypothesised that these students may be looking for something in the curriculum that would assist them in the transition to their working lives.

VET in Schools programs aim to provide students with a broader curriculum that is congruent with their interests – often finding work – engages them in learning and provides a pathway to employment or further education.

Figure 2: Destinations first year after completing school, by VET participation



Pathways: activities after Year 12

The research in this area is in its very early days. As part of the ACER longitudinal studies, far more will be known about the impact of VET over time. Longitudinal research suggests that young people who are out of full-time work for extended periods of time immediately after leaving school are likely to have greater difficulty in finding full-time work in their mid-20s than those who make a smooth transition to work or further education or training. One key criterion for judging the impact of VET will therefore be the extent to which it is associated with entering full-time work, vocational study or training after completing Year 12.

Fullarton (2001) identified seven main post-school activities for this group of school completers. The distribution of students to these destinations in the first year after completing Year 12 is illustrated in Figure 2. Those who participate in VET in Schools were more likely to be working, either full-time or part-time or in an apprenticeship or traineeship, while those who did not participate in VET were more likely to be studying full-time, either at university or TAFE.

Fullarton (2001) also reported that:

- unemployment rates were similar for those who had participated in VET in Schools and those who had not;
- for boys and for the lowest achievement quartile at Year 9 in particular, VET in schools looked more likely to be a pathway to work, rather than to further study, with the reverse being the case for girls; and

- VET in Schools to some extent can be associated with a pathway into post-secondary education, training or work.

While it is not possible to draw a direct causal relationship between participation in VET in Schools programs and helping students to stay at school rather than leaving, it is certainly the case that by broadening the curriculum, schools are providing students with a broader range of opportunities and pathways.

VET in Schools programs have great appeal and value for students with low academic achievement, however they should not be seen as ‘second-best’ to academic subjects. Students across the full range of achievement levels gain from such programs, according to their own interests, learning styles and needs. VET in Schools programs constitute an important vehicle for improving student outcomes – both within the school context and beyond into further education, training and employment.

Participation and achievement in VET of non-completers of school

VET is also an important pathway to further education and training for those who did not complete Year 12. In a study that linked the LSAY data to the AVETMISS (Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard) database, Ball and Lamb (2001) provided information about the characteristics and success rates of school non-completers who

went on to participate in VET. They found that around 37 per cent of the non-completers surveyed had undertaken some sort of VET study in their initial post-school years. Given the relevant retention rates to Year 12, this implies that only 13 per cent of school students for this total cohort had neither completed Year 12 nor continued in some other form of further study.

Ball and Lamb (2001) found that non-completer participation in VET varied by background, reporting that there were lower participation rates for:

- Females (30 per cent, compared to 42 per cent for males);
- those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (35 per cent for those from the lowest quartile of socioeconomic status, compared to 43 per cent for those in the highest quartile); and
- those in areas experiencing lower levels of employment.

Of particular concern with this last group is that where there are job shortages, young people who did not complete Year 12 are tending not to undertake the sorts of education and training that might improve their job prospects. Already the least job-ready, on the basis of their school attainment, they are not participating in VET. Research, policy and program initiatives will be necessary in this area to identify and meet these students’ needs.

Ball and Lamb (2001) also reported that participation in VET varies by course. Over 40 per cent of all non-completers who enrolled in further study – most of them male – entered trade-related courses. This indicates the importance of such courses to the success of male non-completers in making the transition to work.

Female non-completers were more likely to enrol in courses that teach other skills. Almost 60 per cent of modules undertaken by non-completers in the sample resulted in a successful outcome, and these success rates varied depending on the type of qualification undertaken. Failure rates were highest in the more advanced (diploma level) courses, while pass rates were highest in trade-related or similar courses.

On balance, Ball and Lamb (2001) reported that VET is serving the needs of many non-completers of school – such as males in trade apprenticeships. However, VET does not work for everybody. Not all participating non-completers have successful outcomes, and in general, those who did better at school do better on VET courses than those who did not perform so well at school.

There are some groups whose needs are not really being met at the moment, including young people described by Dwyer (1996) as ‘reluctant learners’ and those who leave school early because of circumstances beyond their control, as well as those with the lowest levels of school achievement and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. VET has a continuing role to help pick up more effectively on these vulnerable young people and provide appropriate education and training to assist them through the transition to the workforce.

Research and Policy Implications

Throughout this paper, reference has been made to areas where further research would be desirable, or where policy initiatives might be indicated.

Some of the areas for further research include:

- the links between VET in Schools and improved outcomes for young people in terms of post-school pathways into further study, training or work;
- the appeal and outcomes of VET programs for specific groups, such as boys and girls, students with lower levels of achievement, and those at risk of not completing Year 12;
- on-going monitoring of the experience and outcomes – during their school studies and in their activities beyond Year 12 – for those students who do not participate in VET in Schools, as well as those who undertake either a small or large amount of VET, in order that comparisons can be made;
- the variations in content, delivery and outcomes of VET curriculum in the different jurisdictions around Australia;
- the relationship between the amount of VET undertaken by students and the impact on their future activities;
- differing perceptions of VET in School programs in government and non-government schools;
- the relationship between initial post-school activities and longer-term outcomes;
- participation and non-participation in post-school VET by students who do not complete Year 12;
- the links between VET in Schools and VET post-school, and their impact in terms of improved outcomes for young people as they make the transition to the workforce; and
- identification of the needs of young people living in high unemployment areas to improve their participation in VET.

Some areas where policy initiatives are indicated include:

- development, provision and delivery of VET curriculum in schools that is flexible enough to meet the needs of all students, offering enhanced options and pathways according to their individual interests and levels of achievement – reflecting the intention of the Adelaide Declaration;
- continuing integration of VET in Schools programs with senior schooling certificate courses, to achieve an enhanced balance between academic and work-related learning;
- promotion of VET in Schools programs for their value to students as future citizens and members of the workforce; and
- development, provision and delivery of enhanced VET curriculum beyond the school environment, to meet the needs of non-completers, including those who are currently not entering further education or training as part of their transition to the workforce.

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The Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth

The *Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth* (LSAY) is a research program jointly managed by ACER and the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).

The program includes more than 20 years of data on young Australians as they move through school and into tertiary education, the labour market and adult life.

LSAY commenced in its present form in 1995 with a national sample of 13 000 Year 9 students. Another sample of Year 9 students was drawn in 1998. Data is collected via mail and telephone interviews.

Advice and guidance is provided by a Steering Committee, with representatives from DEST, other Commonwealth departments, the Australian Education Systems Officials

Committee (AESOC), the Conference of ANTA Chief Executive Officers, non-government schools, academics and ACER.

The data collected through LSAY are deposited with the Social Science Data Archives for access by other analysts.

Further information on the LSAY program is available from ACER's Website: www.acer.edu.au



Australian Council for Educational Research
ABN: 19 004 398 145
19 Prospect Hill Road (Private Bag 55)
Camberwell Victoria AUSTRALIA 3124
Phone: (03) 9277 5555 Fax: (03) 9277 5500

www.acer.edu.au



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